

*A free excerpt from the upcoming eBook*

---

# Bootstrapping Design

*Roll your own design.*

---

**Learn easy design strategies to attract more users and help your business succeed.**

If you haven't already, visit <http://BootstrappingDesign.com> to get notified when it's ready.

---

Following is an early draft of *Chapter 4: Typography*. It's just about the longest chapter in the book, so this chapter should give you an idea of what to expect. As you read, please forgive the lack of context, and if you have any feedback or comments, email me at [hello@BootstrappingDesign.com](mailto:hello@BootstrappingDesign.com).

**Thanks for reading!**

Jarrold Drysdale (@studiofellow)

*Chapter 4*

# Typography

Typography presents an incredible opportunity for those of us who are woefully unskilled in illustration or creating custom graphics. It's a surprisingly easy way to add lots of visual appeal to your work.

You'll notice that fonts are a topic of passionate debate in the design community, famously Comic Sans and Papyrus. Furthermore, type geeks have strenuous and detailed criteria for pairing fonts. Ignore all that. The goal for this chapter is to teach you a few simple strategies for getting a custom typographic look without wading through thousands of fonts.

Many design books go into exhaustive detail about typography and explain classifications, historical significance, genres, and other minutiae. Most of this knowledge is of little use for bootstrapping a new business, so I'm leaving it out. If you really want to geek out on the finer points of typography, I'll list a few resources for you at the end of this chapter. However, for the sake of getting your business rolling, here's all you need to know about type.

# Display and Text Fonts

As of right now, start thinking about fonts in terms of two uses: *display* and *text*.

**Display** means headlines, logos, illustrations, and other features that can accommodate larger font sizes or more decorative typography. The goals for display are emphasis and visual interest.

**Text** means paragraphs, long-form content, and prose. Here, the goal is readability.

Some fonts can work well for both display and text. However, many do not. Learning to recognize the difference is important, but there are no concrete rules. Some fonts might not provide enough visual interest to work well in a display setting, while many more decorative display fonts would be nearly impossible to read in a paragraph. The only way to know for sure is to try them out.

## *Type Terms*

**Font:** the software file on your computer that stores the shapes of letters. Arial is a font file. Arial Bold is a second, separate font file.

**Typeface:** the design of the shapes of letters. Arial is a typeface design you can use by installing the Arial font computer file.

**Font Weights:** Versions of the line thickness in letters, such as regular weight and bold weight. Font families can include weights such as: hairline, thin, light, medium, regular, semibold, bold, heavy, black, and ultra.

**Font Styles:** Variations in the shapes of letters such as italics and weights, or combinations of the two.

**Font Family:** The group of font files for each of the styles of a typeface. Arial, Arial Bold, and Arial Italic together form a font family.



### ***Serif***

Typefaces that have short wedge shapes or lines at the ends of the strokes of characters.



### ***Sans Serif***

Typefaces that do not have serifs.



### ***Slab Serif***

Typefaces that have block-like serifs.



### ***Script***

Letters are connected like cursive handwriting.



### ***Italic / Oblique***

Letters are slanted.

# Use Custom Fonts Instead of Defaults

Browser-safe fonts and native device fonts are passable, but you will always get more mileage out of custom fonts, often including better readability. Custom fonts can contribute visual polish without requiring much extra work.



If you are working on the web, use a service like [Typekit](#) or [Fontdeck](#). They are more affordable than buying fonts to install on your computer and provide incredible value. Google's webfonts service is underwhelming, and I really can't recommend any of the fonts provided there. Also, for technical and licensing reasons, running Typekit or Fontdeck is easier than purchasing webfonts to host on your own server and apply via @font-face.

# Choosing Fonts for a Project

The best rule of thumb is to limit your design to two font families. This limit simplifies your decision while creating the design. Each time you discover an element that needs a new style, you have fewer options to weigh.

When picking fonts for your project, use one of these strategies:

## **1. Pick one display font and one versatile text font family.**

Using this strategy, you can have a nice expressive font for your logo or headlines and can fill in the gaps with the more versatile text font family. By versatile, I mean a family that works well for paragraphs, but can also work for buttons, subheaders, and navigation when the display font isn't suitable.

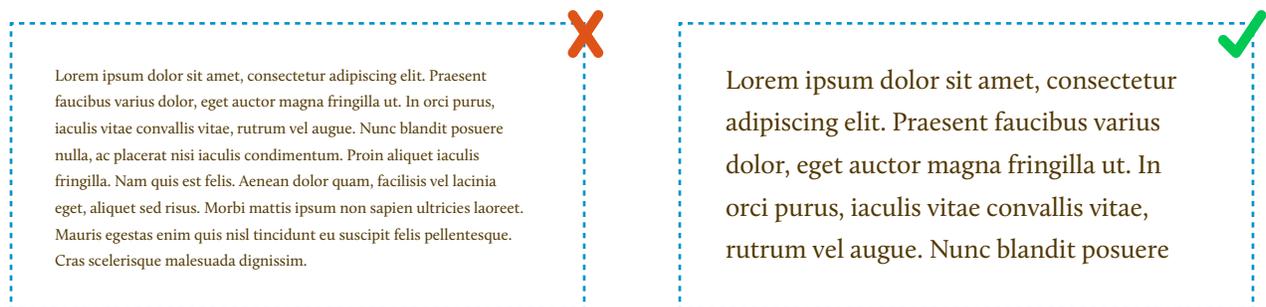
## **2. Pick one extremely versatile font family and use it for everything.**

Some font families are extremely versatile because they include lots of weights and styles. Using one of these

families is a great way to have lots of expressive and dynamic typography that always matches. You don't have to worry about making sure the fonts you pick match. The person who designed the typeface already did that hard work. (You'll notice I used this strategy in this book by picking the *Calluna* font family.)

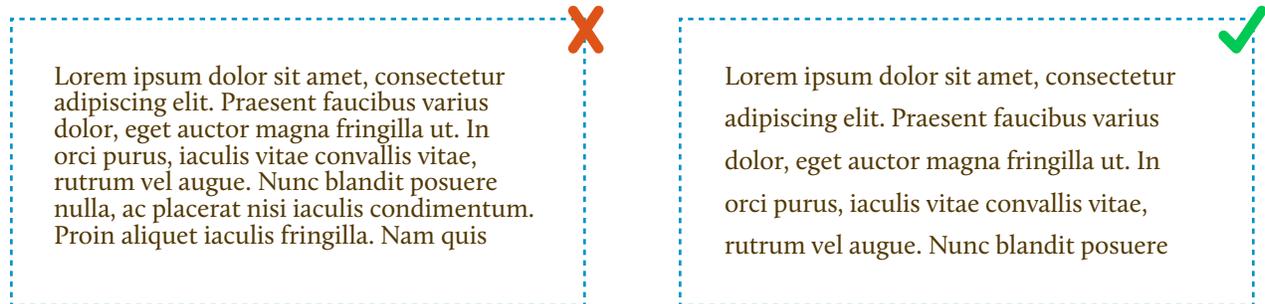
## Readability First

### Font size.



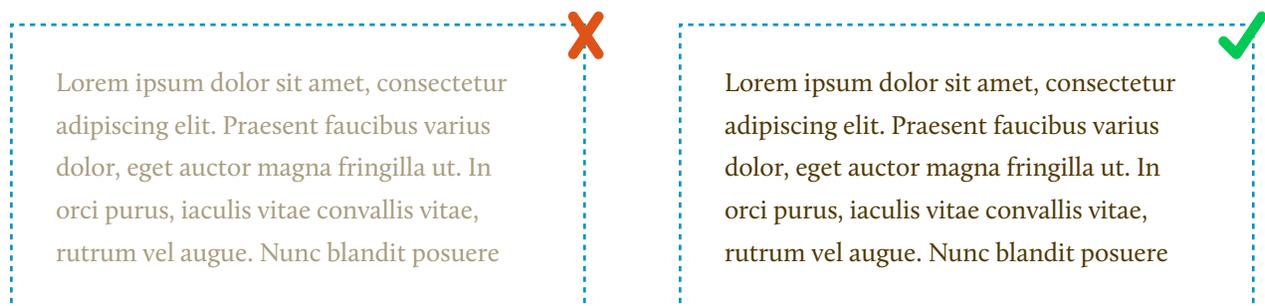
Don't make readers squint. Set paragraph text at a minimum equivalent to 16px, and then pick text sizes for other elements relative to that. Don't decrease the font size if your content looks too long. Instead, edit your content. If your grandma can't read it without her magnifying glass, it's too small.

## Line height (or leading).



The spacing between lines of a paragraph is equally crucial to easy reading. Rule of thumb dictates spacing should equal about 125% of the font size, or 1.25em. You might see need to adjust this depending on the characteristics of the fonts you are using, and that's perfectly fine. In pixels, this translates to 16px size & 20px spacing, 18px & 22px, 20px & 25px, and so on.

## Contrast.



Contrast between text color and background color affects reading speed. Too many websites have light gray text that's hard to read on anything but an Apple Cinema Display.

Give readers a break and use high contrast for all your text.

For more, see the *Contrast* chapter or other great info at <http://ContrastRebellion.com>.

## Maintain Consistent Styles

If you write CSS, you understand the concept of styles that are applied to multiple elements on a web page. Regardless of the medium, maintaining consistent type styles is crucial for the sake of clarity and readability. This sounds simple, but I'd argue it is the biggest and most common typographic mistake that people make.

**Content must be well-organized before you can apply consistent typographic styles.**

Many typographic errors are caused by poorly formatted or organized content. As a designer, you are responsible for facilitating communication—not just dressing it up. This means you must understand which lines are headers, subheaders, or just bold. If you didn't write the content, work with the person who did to get it organized before you continue. This includes a consistent writing style, such as how headlines, block quotes, or bold and italics are used.

*Organize  
your  
content.*

**Use the fewest text styles possible.**

No project needs five different paragraph styles or eight different header styles. Start with one text style for each of the most common elements and be judicious when adding new styles. Reuse styles whenever possible, but not if doing so sacrifices clarity.

**Ensure a minimum difference in text styles.**

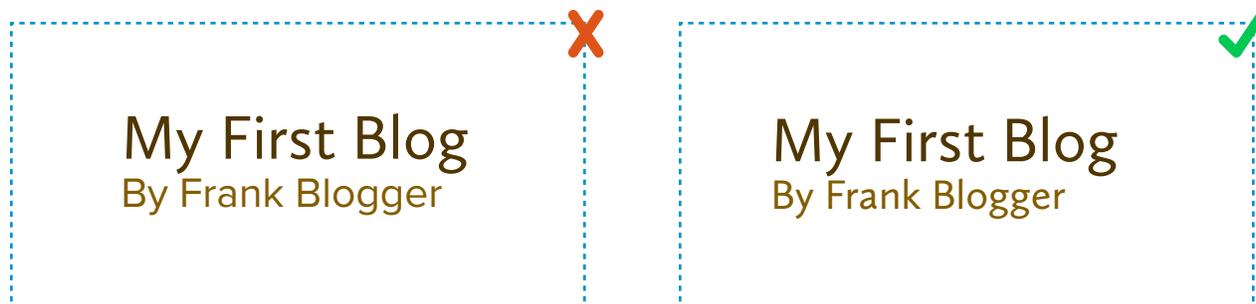
Headers, subheaders, and paragraphs need to be substantially different. For example, do not set a header at 30px bold and a subheader at 28px bold. Readers will not recognize the difference and will struggle to recognize when transitions occur in the content.

Font size is not the only way to differentiate styles. You can also use weight, italics, capitalization, color, and more. For example, main headlines could have a light weight and vastly larger font size, and to contrast, subheaders could be bold and in all caps.

# How to Know If Fonts Go Well Together

Pairing fonts is challenging. As I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, typography geeks often pair fonts based on categories and historical genres. Approaching font selection this way requires substantial knowledge before it becomes productive. This is not an effective use of your time, so instead, here are some simple guidelines for pairing fonts.

**Don't use two fonts that have a similar style.**



*The first example uses two different fonts. Some letters don't match, such as **g**, but some do, like **r**. This looks sloppy applied across an entire design.*

Using two similar fonts is a great way to make your design look amateur. There's no reason to use two similar fonts—one is always better since they serve the same purpose anyway.

**Don't use two fonts that have a lot of personality or are highly decorative.**



*Instead of using two decorative fonts, pick just one of them and use a text font next to it.*

Using two decorative fonts in the same design runs the risk of looking distracting, cluttered, and overwhelming. Some recent design trends, such as retro signage lettering, do this—but they require some experience in order to get the balance right. It's not worth the risk and added time spent while you are trying to get your business off the ground. Instead, just pick one of the display fonts and let it be the center of attention.

**Consider using a serif and a sans-serif, possibly from the same family.**



*Calluna and Calluna Sans are designed to go well together.*

A classic and beautiful pairing is a sans serif for display and a serif for text. Inverting that can work too. The point is that choosing a serif and sans reduces the likelihood that the fonts will clash because they start off substantially different. Even better is if they are part of the same font family they are guaranteed to match, such as a couple of the suggested starter font families in this chapter.

### **Don't over-think it. Just try it.**

Lorem ipsum dolor Morbi accumsan tincidunt augue et aliquam. In et dui purus, eu accumsan metus.	Lorem ipsum dolor Morbi accumsan tincidunt augue et aliquam. In et dui purus, eu accumsan metus.	<i> Lorem ipsum dolor </i> Morbi accumsan tincidunt augue et aliquam. In et dui purus, eu accumsan metus.	Lorem ipsum dolor Morbi accumsan tincidunt augue et aliquam. In et dui purus, eu accumsan metus.
---	---	--	---

The best way to know if fonts go well together is to try them! A common method for doing so is to use what some call a “type study.” A type study is essentially just a template of fake content you can use to switch out fonts for comparison. Use something like Lorem Ipsum ([lipsum.com](https://lipsum.com)) and create a page with a headline and a paragraph. Save several copies of the page and try different font combinations on each. You can do this in any format you want, such as html, Photoshop, or even just a text editor. Print them out and compare. This is easier than switching out fonts repeatedly on your real design.

# How To Get Started With Typography

## **Pick your go-to fonts.**

Rather than face the sheer volume of choices head on, start small. Choose just a couple of font families that you really like and use them for every project. The truth is, you don't need a new unique font for every project. The best fonts are versatile. They are suitable for a variety of design aesthetics. Pick out a couple of favorites; these are your go-to font families. Then use them everywhere. Later on in the chapter, I'll provide a few suggestions to get you started.

## **Don't try to be creative.**

Here comes that condescension you were expecting. Getting good at design means cultivating your taste. Right now, you don't have it. Eventually you will, but until then you cannot trust your creativity. Instead, focus on simplicity, clarity, and the cold, hard science of what works. Decorative or overtly expressive typography is difficult to achieve without looking tacky or unprofessional. For now, be conservative.

*Don't  
try to be  
creative.*

Delay trying more sophisticated styles until you have some more experience under your belt.

### **Let the font do the heavy lifting.**

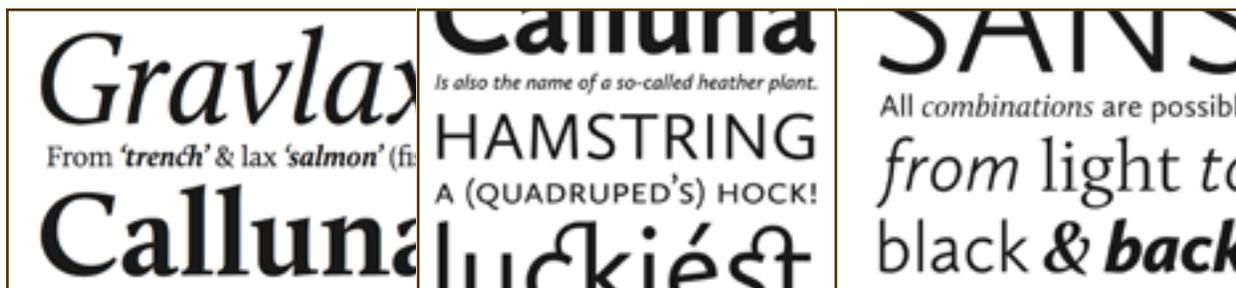
Don't try to modify your fonts or draw special shapes or characters. Don't try to make it fancy or unique. Beautiful typography is about calling attention to the elegant shapes of the letters. It's an exercise in restraint. Pick a quality font and let it speak for itself. Type designers spend thousands of hours perfecting every curve and angle of every character in their fonts. Right now, you are no match for their skill. Lend some trust. Let your fonts work for you. That's what the pros do, and that's how you'll get beautiful typography.

## Versatile Font Families to Get You Started

Many design books will point you toward traditional fonts like Trajan, Garamond, and Gill Sans. That's fine, but these fonts probably aren't going to give you the look you want for projects like modern web applications. (Furthermore, pairing them with node.js, Rails 3, or MongoDB hotness

seems downright immoral.) So instead of supplying the old-school staples, I'm going to recommend some newer, more popular, but also impeccably well crafted and timeless fonts as a starting point for your typography adventures. All the fonts below work great for both display and text and are available on *Typekit*.

## Calluna & Calluna Sans



*Taken from online PDF type specimens for [Calluna](#) and [Calluna Sans](#).  
All rights belong to respective creators.*

## FF Meta & FF Meta Serif



*Taken from online type specimens for [FF Meta](#) and [FF Meta Serif](#).  
All rights belong to respective creators.*

## Proxima Nova



*Taken from online PDF type specimens for [Proxima Nova](#).  
All rights belong to respective creators.*

## Skolar



*Taken from online PDF type specimens for [Skolar](#).  
All rights belong to respective creators.*

## Adelle



*Taken from online PDF type specimens for [Adelle](#).  
All rights belong to respective creators.*

# How to Find New Fonts

Take a few minutes and browse some design work that you admire. Jot down the fonts used and build a short list. Then, try them out using the type tester features on [Typekit](#), [Fontshop](#), or [MyFonts](#). You can read more ideas about this tactic in the upcoming chapter, *How To Steal*. Also, the resources below are great places to discover new fonts.

## Further Reading & Inspiration

[The Typographic Desk Reference](#)

[FontShop Email Newsletter](#)

[FontFeed](#), blog

[MyFonts Email Newsletter](#)

[Typophile](#), an online typography community

[Typographica](#), type reviews, books, commentary

[I Love Typography](#), blog

[Typedia](#), an online shared encyclopedia of typefaces

[The Elements of Typographics Style Applied to the Web](#)